

# Literary Lives and a Literal Death: Yājñavalkya, Śākalya, and an Upaniṣadic Death Sentence

Steven E. Lindquist\*

One of the most popular stories found in the Upaniṣads centers around a debate between the ritualist and philosopher, Yājñavalkya, and a series of interlocutors about the nature of sacrifice, the self, and the cosmos. This story, from a textual–historical perspective, is unique in that the last interlocutor, Śākalya, is said to die by having his head shatter because he is unable to answer a question about the fundamental nature of immortality. In this paper, I analyze the interrelationship of these two main characters and argue that this relationship is one key to not only understanding the portrayal of these characters, but also the larger import of this debate about immortality. I provide an intratextual rationale for the head-shattering conclusion and discuss how character and doctrine are fundamentally intertwined in this text.

THE UPANIṢADS ARE SOME of the most important texts from early India (ca. seventh-century BCE onwards), not only because of their role as root texts in later schools of Indian philosophy (*darśanas*), but also because of the popularity they have assumed in the general consciousness of many Hindus. Contrary to the emphasis on philosophy found in both

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\*Steven E. Lindquist, Department of Religious Studies, Southern Methodist University, PO Box 750202, Dallas, TX 75275-0202, USA. E-mail: [slindqui@smu.edu](mailto:slindqui@smu.edu). My thanks are extended to Patrick Olivelle, Martha Selby, Stephanie Jamison, John Nemec, Christian Novetzke, and Brian Black for their comments on this paper. Versions of this argument were presented at the Fourth International Vedic Workshop held at The University of Texas at Austin (2007) and in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, The University of Michigan (2010).

secondary scholarship and Sanskrit commentaries, perhaps the most popular aspect of the Upaniṣads has been the narrative portions. Many of the Upaniṣads contain stories which, while containing philosophical and religious content, are presented as dialogues between fathers and sons, teachers and students, and kings and Brahmins. These stories are often true-to-life (if not true-in-life), though they occasionally contain fantastic elements as well. One of the most famous of these stories is also probably one of the oldest and is found in the third chapter of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BĀU). The character at the center of this story is Yājñavalkya, a ritualist and philosopher, known not only for his debating prowess, but also for his pride and sharp tongue.

BĀU chapter 3 is an extended debate between Yājñavalkya and a series of interlocutors on the nature of and the relationship among the sacrifice, the self, and the cosmos. The story opens at the court of King Janaka, where Yājñavalkya claims the cows meant for the *brahmiṣṭha*, the one most learned in *brahman*, and he is required to prove himself worthy of that claim through a series of religious and intellectual challenges. Having successfully answered a series of the questions put to him, the final episode (BĀU 3.9) is the most important, both in the narrative and for my purposes here. The final interlocutor, Śākalya, poses the greatest challenge to Yājñavalkya—he is not only the most famous among a group of Brahmins,<sup>1</sup> but his verbal exchange with Yājñavalkya is also the most elaborate. This part of the narrative is a proper debate between Yājñavalkya and Śākalya—a sparring dialogue where both individuals challenge each other in their knowledge. This is in contrast to the more simple question and answer format that precedes this episode. At the end of the debate (3.9.26), Yājñavalkya poses a final question to Śākalya, threatening him that his head will shatter apart (*vi- √pat*) if he cannot answer. Śākalya is unable to answer and the death sentence becomes a reality. Obviously, this concludes the debate between Yājñavalkya and Śākalya, but enigmatically this passage ends by saying that robbers later stole Śākalya's bones, "thinking that they were something else" (*anyan manyamānāḥ*).

While these papers are concerned with the "lives" of literary figures from ancient South Asia, I want to approach my topic in a fashion that may appear less obvious. Though Yājñavalkya is the narrative center of the BĀU and would seem to be the most obvious focus for a discussion of literary lives,<sup>2</sup> I instead want to emphasize the role of his most

<sup>1</sup>He is credited with creating the *padapāṭha* of the *Rgveda*.

<sup>2</sup>See Black and Geen's introductory essay and Lindquist (forthcoming [b]).

significant rival, Śākalya, and the narrative relationship established between these two characters. By looking closely at this relationship, I will argue how the “literary life” of one character is dramatically defined by the literary, but starkly literal, death of another. I want to do this for two reasons. First of all, this episode, both structurally and in regard to content, is the most important in the narrative. Structurally, this episode concludes the larger debate and ends with the death of Śākalya—a death which serves as the climax and thus final proof of Yājñavalkya’s superiority. Thematically, this passage is the most detailed of all the episodes in this text and, as I point out below, encapsulates much of what precedes it. As the finale of the text, an understanding of this passage is pivotal in understanding the text as a whole. Second, I want to emphasize that a study of secondary characters in ancient literature can bring out surprisingly new ways to approach old texts. Through analyzing Śākalya, particularly in his defeat, we are granted a new means for understanding the greater philosophical import of the text and Yājñavalkya’s role in it. By analogy, this approach is akin to the Upaniṣadic tendency to describe the individual self (*ātman*) or cosmic foundation (*brahman*) in the negative (*neti neti*, “not this, not that”). In this fashion, we can gain a further understanding of Yājñavalkya by means of negative contrast—through a study of who he is not.

This paper is also an example of a different means for approaching Upaniṣadic narratives and the characters within them. In academic circles in general, Upaniṣadic narrative is taken as a form of “adornment” to the philosophical content.<sup>3</sup> My principal concern here is not only to analyze BĀU 3 in its own right, but also to examine the relation between the doctrinal matters discussed and the presentation of the characters themselves. Olivelle’s recent case study (1999) of Śvetaketu is an excellent example of how the portrayal of a particular Upaniṣadic character can be directly connected to the larger religious or philosophical goals of particular composers. Olivelle’s approach there was to analyze the differences in Śvetaketu’s characterization and its relation to doctrine in three different stories. My approach here is to focus on the intratextual logic of character and doctrine, where the contrast of characterization is between two characters in the same story. Both approaches, however, emphasize the relationship of doctrine and character as a valuable avenue for understanding the nature of Upaniṣadic

<sup>3</sup>The most significant exceptions include: Olivelle (1997, 1999), Brereton (1997), Hock (2002), Black (2007), and Lindquist (2008, forthcoming [b]).

narrative. One larger goal of this paper, in particular, is to argue how character and story are part and parcel of the philosophical discussion in this Upaniṣad—or, to put it another way, how story functions as argument.

## SHATTERED HEADS AND NARRATIVE TROPES

Though narratively out of place from the text itself, it serves our purpose best to begin with how BĀU 3 ends: the graphic defeat of Śākalya. From a textual–historical perspective, the reason to do so is straightforward: the fate of Śākalya, while clearly the climax to this section, is also a textual anomaly in early Sanskrit literature as a whole. While the threat of a “shattered head” appears several times in earlier material, it is a literary trope without an apparent literal sense, at least one that is (almost) never actualized. The threat of a shattered head was apparently a threat uttered by one party as a means to end inappropriate questioning and to signal that the other party should concede (either by ceasing the interrogation and/or by becoming a student of the other).<sup>4</sup> In no earlier textual instance is this threat of a shattered head taken literally by the composers of these texts, which makes the BĀU text unique. To phrase this slightly differently: why, in the early material, is this trope taken literally only in the case of Śākalya?

Previous scholarship on this issue has focused on the origin of the trope of the shattered head, but with only very limited success in understanding Śākalya’s particular fate. This is, as I will show below, because scholarship has been concerned with tracing the use and origin of this trope, but has ignored what it might mean in this particular context. As such, the historical trajectory of the shattered-head trope is, at best, only a partial answer to its anomalous use in the BĀU. In particular, Witzel (1987) and Insler (1989–90) have published different theories on the origin of the “head shattering” (*vi-√pat*). On the one hand, Witzel has argued that there is a literal legal tradition entailing the smashing of a person’s head as a form of corporal punishment from which this trope emerged. A “shattered head” becomes a literary device as a threat of punishment in asking beyond the limits of one’s own knowledge. The literal sense disappears in the textual accounts and this literary trope functions as a litmus test for admitting the truth about one’s ignorance.<sup>5</sup> In such cases of the shattered-head trope, the individual

<sup>4</sup>Witzel (1987: 369–372) mentions several criteria for the appearance of the shattered-head trope, though here I am only concerned with the narrative conclusions of such episodes.

<sup>5</sup>This literal sense may have been present in pre-Upaniṣadic ritual settings (Witzel 1987).

is called out for his inappropriate question and he avoids the head-shattering consequences by admitting the superiority of the other discussant.<sup>6</sup> Witzel (1987: 381ff.) points to a modification of this trope in the Buddhist *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* where the Buddha utilizes a similar threat to force an individual to admit to knowledge that he *does* possess (instead of admitting ignorance).<sup>7</sup> Witzel (1987: 407) suggests that this trope develops from a “fossil” of older practices that morphed into a rhetorical strategy in Brāhmaṇical debates (*brahmodya*) found especially in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads.<sup>8</sup> Śākalya’s case is different from other uses only in that its historical origin of a literal threat reemerges in this particular telling. Witzel, however, does not adequately explain *why* this reemergence occurs. He speculates (1987: 413) that since the larger context of this debate is a sacrificial setting, there may have been the need for a sacrificial head to be offered (again, suggesting a reemergence of an older form, in this case of Indo-European sacrifice). The difficulty with this interpretation of the literal fate of Śākalya is that it remains only a suggestive possibility which Witzel does not address in any detail. Insler (1989–90), on the other hand, has argued that there are two distinct origins of the shattered head, one which is more figurative (arguing that a shattered head may have colloquially meant to make a fool of oneself) and another, quite separate origin, based in corporal punishment. He emphasizes the differences in phrasing and the use of different verbs to point to two origins.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the BĀU, he argues that the origin of a shattered head in a *brahmodya* setting is a statement about the inability to comprehend a type or formulation of knowledge. In this case, it is apparently related to the mental composition of the individual and contains no literal threat.

The strength of Witzel’s argument is in the classification and elucidation of various places where this trope appears, but in regard to origins, I find Insler’s dual formulation more convincing. This is because of the apparent consistency in the use of verbs, suggesting two different formulations developing in different trajectories. In any event,

<sup>6</sup>For a summation, see Witzel (1987: 370–372, 375).

<sup>7</sup>See Black in this volume.

<sup>8</sup>Both Witzel and Insler point out, though, that there are other passages related to “ignorance” of ritual matters that could lead to the same consequence, but these are phrased as open threats without any details that they actually occur (ChU 1.8.1, 1.10. 7, ŚB 3.6.1.23, BĀU 1.3.24). Insler (1989–90: 101–102) suggests that these are an extension of the “ignorance” theme and not typical threats for ritual errors.

<sup>9</sup>In these discussions, we find variations of the phrasing *mūrdhā vipatati* and in other cases, such as punishment for rape, *praharati*, and *prajaghāna* (and, in the Pāli, *muddhā phalati*; Insler 1989–90: 105).

though, Insler's argument still leaves us with the problem of why there is a literal interpretation of this trope only in BĀU 3.

Certainly, it is possible that a literal interpretation of the shattered head in BĀU is a random oddity in the extant textual sources. There is no reason to deny *a priori* the possibility that a particular text or tradition could have been innovative and created a radically novel use of a trope. We often grant the possibility for innovation in philosophical thinking, but it is equally evident in the development of narrative tropes/themes. In fact, I will argue that the literal interpretation of the shattered-head trope is *innovative* in this context—not simply as a glorification of Yājñavalkya's victory (Insler 1989–90), but specifically because it is intimately tied to the philosophical argument made in the text. The literal head shattering is not simply a narrative detail—if there even is such a thing—but a central element to understanding the text.

Contrary to Witzel and Insler, my concern is neither what the shattered-head trope may have meant nor how it developed. Certainly, the origin and development of a particular trope is important, and this paper builds on their previous scholarly work. I contend, however, that a search for origins does not further an understanding of the literal use of the shattered head in this narrative context. My focus, then, is on the narrative rationale for the use of this trope and its literal rendering.

To state the question that began my inquiry more baldly: why does Śākalya have to die at all? Why doesn't the debate just end with his defeat?<sup>10</sup> Following the commentarial tradition, many (such as Eggeling 1993–94) have pointed out that Śākalya's death was foreshadowed in a passage in the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* (ŚBM 11.6.3 = ŚBK 13.6.3),<sup>11</sup> and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* narrative is simply fulfilling that claim. Such a view, though, makes the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* story simply derivative of a hypotext, rather than coherent in its own right.<sup>12</sup> Others have suggested that this threat of death by head shattering (and, here, its actual occurrence)

<sup>10</sup>In this case, by Śākalya falling silent (*upararāma*) as every other character does in the face of Yājñavalkya's intellectual superiority.

<sup>11</sup>M and K refer to the Mādhyandina and Kāṇva recensions of ŚB of which the BĀU is a part. The former has been critically edited by Weber (1997), while the latter only partially so by Swaminathan (1994–2001).

<sup>12</sup>The notion of "intertextuality," that a listening audience may naturally draw associations between different oral texts without the need to repeat directly from those other texts, is a well-attested phenomenon, and I am not denying its value in reconstructing meaning in a particular text or its role in the cultural understanding of literary characters (see the introductory essay). However, as Brereton (1997) has pointed out in the case of BĀU 3, there are good reasons to take this text as a coherent unit in its own right. As such, my concern here is principally in utilizing an intratextual reading to understand the meaning of the shatter-head trope with the goal that it aids in a larger understanding of the intertextual characters of Yājñavalkya and Śākalya.

adds tension to the narrative or is indicative of the danger of abstract religious debate.<sup>13</sup> I want to extend this discussion and formally analyze how this tension is constituted within the narrative, how certain literary devices are used to lead to such a conclusion, and what function such danger may play in this particular story. These are the questions that I will consider through a close reading of BĀU chapter 3 and a larger discussion of the role that Śākalya plays in the narrative.

In an attempt to analyze the character of Śākalya here, it is necessary to highlight an under-appreciated theme in this text that aids in understanding the greater role of Śākalya in his closing of this debate. As such, I further argue that this theme is a leitmotif of Yājñavalkya's discussion as a whole, forcing us to rethink the philosophical position of this text. While many scholars, both in the commentarial and in the academic tradition, have discussed the nature of *ātman* and *brahman* in this text, often in a non-dual (*advaita*) context, I would like to posit that there is a principal theme in this text that is largely overlooked or glossed over to focus on its transcendence. That theme is death.

The commentarial and broader Hindu tradition has focused on the salvific aspects of this text and for obvious reasons: it is the religious goal of immortality or transcendence that is the fundamental end-goal for a believer. Scholars have generally focused on the same. Of course, it is important to do so to understand the needs and motivations of those for whom such texts were and are important, but in doing so, scholars have glossed over the main discussion that brings about the need for salvation in the first place: the very real fact that people die.<sup>14</sup> In this fashion, this text can be read as having as much, if not more, to do with the nature of death as it does with transcending it. In fact, as I will argue, the emphasis that I place on the theme of death in this paper requires us to rethink the role of immortality in the course of the narrative.

## MUCH ADO ABOUT DYING

While death is clearly not the only theme of BĀU 3, it is a major concern of the text. The text offers a coherent presentation of the role of death, and that presentation provides one means to understand its construction and one of its larger goals. In fact, the prevalence of death in

<sup>13</sup>For example, Witzel (1987) and Black (2007).

<sup>14</sup>I have argued elsewhere that this text, or at least the final poem which occurs after the debate (BĀU 3.9.28), affirms the theory of rebirth (Lindquist 2004). This is likely a poem that was tacked on to the end of the text *precisely because of its apparent thematic continuity*.



BĀU 3 suggests that it was very much a concern for the composer(s). Specifically, the coherence of the discussion about death suggests that the compositional pattern of this text as a whole is intentional. Scholars have tended to view BĀU 3 as a conglomeration of various sub-stories (represented in the different interlocutors) and have utilized this fact to explain what they saw as redundancy or inconsistency. While it is likely that there are multiple sources for this chapter, this does not mean the pattern is unintentional.<sup>15</sup> Even as a compilation, it will become clear that the editor(s) did his/her job quite ingeniously in weaving a comprehensive structure into the different stories and making a cohesive whole of the text and its discussion of death.

In the context of death, I divide BĀU 3 into four sections which logically follow the course of the narrative itself: (1) death and its cosmic counterparts, (2) death and what happens to the individual at and following death, (3) a discussion of what does not die, and (4) a discussion of what dies and under what circumstances it does so. The focus of scholars and commentators has usually been on (3) which, while important, is only one part of the larger argument of the text. Let me first discuss (1) and (2), while (3) only needs a brief summary. In (4), the Śākalya episode will be dealt with more closely as it brings about the culmination of the text and says much more than has been apparent in previous scholarship, not only about death, but also about immortality.

As this text presents a coherent discussion of death in the linear progression of the narrative, it makes sense to follow these four sections in order as it shows how the argument builds upon itself. After a discussion of each, I will return to the argument as a whole and what this tells us about the nature of death and immortality in the text and I will suggest a new way of understanding the characters of Yājñavalkya and Śākalya.

## DEATH AND COSMIC COUNTERPARTS

BĀU 3 consists of a series of episodes, all bound together in a larger narrative about a religious debate at Janaka's court. It is clear that the original frame to this story is from the ŚB (M 11.6.3 = K 13.6.3), where a similar debate occurred, but in that context it was only Śākalya who challenged Yājñavalkya. Also, in that story Yājñavalkya threatened Śākalya for "asking beyond" *prāṇa* ("breath") and said that he would

<sup>15</sup>What is often pointed to is "doubling" or the repeating of certain questions, scenarios, or even characters (Kāpya's wife then daughter; Gārgi asking questions at two different points in the discussion, and so on). Brereton (1997) and Lindquist (2008, forthcoming [a] and [b]) have shown that these serve various narrative purposes suggesting a rationale for their inclusion.



eventually die, but there are no details in this version other than a statement that the death occurred and afterwards robbers stole away Śākalya's bones.<sup>16</sup>

BĀU 3 utilizes the ŚB story as a frame, but also greatly modifies and elaborates it. BĀU 3 begins similarly to the ŚB account—Janaka is holding a sacrifice and declares a contest to determine who is the most learned in *brahman* (*brahmiṣṭha*). However, rather than one Brahmin challenging Yājñavalkya as in the ŚB, he is questioned by a series of eight Brahmins (with the lone female, Gārgī, questioning on two occasions).<sup>17</sup> Witzel (1987: 402–403) has pointed out that a number of these figures attending the debate represent different western schools, particularly of the *R̥gveda*. All, including Yājñavalkya, are stated to be Kuru-Pañcāla Brahmins.

In a formal study of the structure of BĀU 3, Brereton (1997) has pointed out that (1) different passages (particularly three paired dialogues: the Gandharva passages, Gārgī's two questions, and the repetition of the two "self within all" passages) are thematically linked to one another; (2) that a formal literary ring is formed by answers concerning sets of eight properties or things; (3) that BĀU 3.1 and 3.2 are formally connected by a play on the preverb *ati*;<sup>18</sup> and (4) that the poem at the end of our story (3.9.28) returns to the theme of immortality and death introduced in the beginning.<sup>19</sup> The binding theme in all dialogues, according to him, is the movement in this world and the next and the fundamental principle that lies behind it. His schema of the structure of the narrative also suggests that

perhaps the best way to approach this passage is to read it by the levels indicated in the initial schema rather than sequentially. (Brereton 1997: 14)

<sup>16</sup>Because of brevity, the meaning of the robbers' theft in both versions is unclear. It appears that there is a (perhaps humorous) paralleling of the ignorance of Śākalya with the ignorance of the robbers, as commentators state that the robbers perhaps mistook his bones for treasure hidden in a vessel. It is also possible that this passage was intended as an additional ignominy to Śākalya's death, because there is the implication that proper death rites could not be carried out and his fate in the afterlife may have been in question. This last reading would be particularly appropriate to the BĀU narrative (see below).

<sup>17</sup>On the role of women in this text, see Lindquist (2005, 2008) and Black (2007: 150ff).

<sup>18</sup>In this case, the ring is both formal and thematic. "The *atimokṣas* and their equivalents are an ascent after death to an immortal world; the *grahas* and *atigrahas* are a descent into life and into the perception of this world. Thus, formal correspondence, created by verbal repetition (the preverb *ati*) and by the proximity of the two passages, leads to the recognition of their contrasting elements and themes" (Brereton 1997: 8).

<sup>19</sup>On this poem, see also Lindquist (2004).

Brereton's article is the first I am aware of that takes the formal literary structure of this text seriously, rather than to follow a common text-critical tendency of parsing out the repeated structures as textual accumulations and viewing them as distinct and unrelated to a larger whole. Though I find Brereton's schema enlightening and useful for understanding BĀU 3, I would like to propose an alternate narrative schema for understanding the text, one that follows the linearity of the narrative and shows a longer, coherent argument about death than he suggests.

After Yājñavalkya claims the cows at the beginning of this text, a priest steps forward to question his claim and to begin the debate formally. The theme of death (*mṛtyu*) serves to open the discussion. The *hotṛ* priest, Aśvala, is the first to challenge Yājñavalkya's knowledge and he begins by asking Yājñavalkya about the nature of the world and death (BĀU 3.1.3).

*yājñavalkyeti hovāca | yad idaṁ sarvaṁ mṛtyunāptam sarvaṁ  
mṛtyunābhipannaṁ kena yajamāno mṛtyor āptim atimucyata iti |  
hotṛartvijāgninā vācā | vāg vai yajñasya hotā | tad yeyaṁ vāk so 'yam  
agniḥ sa hotā sā muktiḥ sātimumktiḥ ||*

"Yājñavalkya," [Aśvala] said, "when this all [i.e., whole world] is reached by death, when all is overtaken by death, by what means does a *yajamāna* [patron of the sacrifice] free himself completely from the reach of death?"

[Yājñavalkya replied,] "By means of the *Hotṛ*-priest, by means of the fire, by means of speech. Indeed, the *Hotṛ* of the sacrifice is speech. This speech—it is this fire here, it is the *Hotṛ*, it is freedom, it is complete freedom."<sup>20</sup>

This passage is clearly a valorization of the *Hotṛ*-priest's role. This is appropriate as Aśvala begins his questioning by asking about what is closest to home—apparently, his own role in the sacrifice that will take place at Janaka's court. This passage appears to be stating that death encompasses everything (i.e., everything dies), so the question is about how an individual priest in the sacrifice aids the patron in transcending it. This theme of death is then continued in Aśvala's further questions to Yājñavalkya (3.1.4–3.1.5) in an exact parallel structure, but this time in relation to time—being "reached and overtaken" by the days and the nights and then the fortnights. Yājñavalkya answers in regard to the other types of priests present. These passages seem to be saying that the passage of time leads to death. This seems likely given that they are verbally

<sup>20</sup> All translations are my own.

paralleled by Yājñavalkya's continued use of *āpta* ("reached") and *abhipanna* ("overtaken") introduced in the first question about death.<sup>21</sup>

The roles of the other priests are discussed, culminating with the role of the Brahmin priest who aids the patron in climbing to heaven—a reference to not only what happens in the sacrifice, but also what will (or should) happen after death. The text continues with questions about the tripartite division of the universe (3.1.10) and the various worlds that are won by the patron of the sacrifice. These worlds are an interlocking hierarchy of mundane, intermediate, and heavenly worlds, suggesting that the worlds of the living and the worlds in the hereafter are conquered during the course of the sacrifice.

In 3.2, Ārtabhāga asks Yājñavalkya about the nature of the "graspers" (*graha*) and the "over-graspers" (*atigraha*). The "graspers" are the out-breath, speech, tongue, sight, hearing, mind, hands, and skin and the "over-graspers" are the objects which these "grasp": the in-breath, word, flavor, visible appearances, hearing, desire, action, and touch. This is apparently one type of classification for sense-organs and their objects.

Though a discussion of "graspers" and "over-graspers" may seem separate from the topic of death, this section then directly ties itself back to the earlier theme of death. 3.2.10 states that everything in this world is consumed by death, but then asks what deity consumes death itself (i.e., is beyond death).

*yājñavalkyeti hovāca | yad idaṃ sarvaṃ mr̥tyor annaṃ kā svit sā devatā yasyā mr̥tyur annam iti | agnir vai mr̥tyuḥ | so 'pām annam | apa punarmr̥tyuṃ jayati ||*

"Yājñavalkya," he said. "This all [i.e., whole world] is the food of death, of which deity is death the food?"

[Yājñavalkya replied,] "Death, indeed, is fire. It [fire] is the food of water. [Whoever knows this]<sup>22</sup> avoids repeated death."

At least as far as this passage is concerned, there is a means to overcome death. In knowing that death (here, fire) can be conquered (by water), Yājñavalkya tells Ārtabhāga that the person who knows the meaning of this esoteric passage also conquers death. What exactly "water" might be a secondary reference to is unclear, but whatever it is, the knowledge of it is clearly the culmination of this passage.

<sup>21</sup> A distinction between *āpta* and *abhipanna* appears to be mirrored in *mukti* and *atimukti*, probably indicating intensification. My thanks to Tim Lubin for discussing this passage with me at length.

<sup>22</sup> Olivelle reads (1998: 81), I think correctly, an implicit "whoever knows this" (cf. 3.3.2). It should be pointed out that in the previous section it is by *actually using* the verses in the sacrifice that one attains various worlds—thus there is a shift from ritual use to the primacy of knowledge in 3.2.

## DEATH AND ITS AFTERMATH

The next passage shifts the topic to more mundane concerns about what happens after death. It should be noted that this is still part of BĀU 3.2, but I thematically divide the text because the more concrete examples here are, for my purposes, one step removed from the above ritual context.

BĀU 3.2.11 is concrete in its question and answer. Ārtabhāga asks whether the breaths (*prāṇa*, the first “grasper” mentioned at the beginning of this passage) leave a person or not at death. The response is that they do not leave a person.

*neti hovāca yājñavalkyaḥ | atraiva samavanīyante | sa ucchvayati |  
ādhmāyati | ādhmāto mṛtaḥ śete ||*

“No,” Yājñavalkya replied. “They accumulate right here [i.e., in the body] causing it to swell and bloat. [Thus] a dead man lies bloated.”<sup>23</sup>

The level of abstraction in the following questions increase, but they are still thematically tied together in the aftermath of death. BĀU 3.2.12 states that a person’s name does not leave after death because a name is not finite (*ananta*) like a person. BĀU 3.2.13 explains where the parts of a person’s body go after death. This list is very similar to the list of “graspers” earlier, though “hands” and “skin” are not mentioned and others are added, such as *ātman* (here, most likely, the “body”), hair, blood, and semen. There is clearly a principle of magical equivalence at play here—breath is said to go to the wind, speech to fire, sight to the sun, mind to the moon, the hairs of the body and the head to plants and trees, respectively, and blood and semen to water. This passage ends by asking what happens to the “person” (*puruṣa*) after this, either referring to some more basic principle (perhaps the sense of the *ātman* as the “self”) or it is referring to the person as a whole and his fate in the next life. I find the latter more likely because what follows is the earliest (if frustratingly terse) discussion of *karma* (“action”) as a system of retributory consequence. Yājñavalkya leads Ārtabhāga away to discuss *karma*, though we are told nothing about what *karma* means other than good action leads to good and bad to bad.<sup>24</sup>

This thematic section, which I have labeled “Death and Its Aftermath,” ends with a question about where very particular

<sup>23</sup>Cf. BĀU 1.2.6 where the breaths depart from a horse, but he still bloats.

<sup>24</sup>*punyo vai punyena karmaṇā bhavati pāpaḥ pāpeneti*. Regarding the development of an “ethics” of action and its reward, see Tull (1989).

individuals go after death. Bhujyu Lāhyāyani (3.3) asks where the Pārikṣitas, famous ancient kings who performed the *aśvamedha* (horse sacrifice), went after death.<sup>25</sup> The *aśvamedha* is an appropriate climax to this thematic section, not only because this sacrifice is the most elaborate royal rite known, but also because it once again ties the narrative back to its beginning.<sup>26</sup> The text began in the sacrificial arena of the court of Janaka where Aśvala asked Yājñavalkya about the roles of various priests and how they benefit the patron who is paying for their services. Generally speaking, this was a question about both the participants and the goals of a sacrifice writ large. Specifically, though, these sections are probably self-referential to the participants present in this debate and their apparent roles in Janaka's planned sacrifice. The text begins by discussing the value of sacrifice and what worlds are won after death and then shifts into a discussion about the nature of death itself. Here, though, the text directly brings together sacrifice and the nature of death in answering what happens at death for those who perform, not just any sacrifice, but the most elaborate *śrauta* sacrifice for kings. At least theoretically, the king here must represent the most important political unit and the *aśvamedha* the most important sacrifice. Explicit in the characters themselves is the most important sacral unit, the Brahmin priests. This passage, then, is a narrative intensification of both the theme of death and the role of sacrifice.

Yājñavalkya answers in a circular fashion stating that the performers of this sacrifice go to the place of *aśvamedha*-sacrificers, but upon further questioning he describes this place as ultimately the wind (*vāyu*):

*dvātriṃśataṃ vai devarathāhnyāny ayaṃ lokaḥ | tāṃ samantaṃ  
prṥthivīṃ dviś tāvāt paryeti | tāṃ samantaṃ prṥthivīm dviś tāvāt samudraḥ  
paryeti | tad yāvati kṣurasya dhārā yāvad vā makṣikāyāḥ patraṃ tāvān  
antareṇākāśas tān indraḥ suparṇo bhūtvā vāyave prāyacchat | tān  
vāyur ātmani dhītvā tatrāgamayad yatrāśvamedhayājino 'bhavann iti |  
evam iva vai sa vāyur eva praśaśaṃsa | tasmād vāyur eva vyaṣṭir  
vāyuh samaṣṭiḥ | apa punarmrtyuṃ jayati ya evaṃ veda |*

“This world is [the distance of the traversing of] the chariot of the gods for thirty-two days.<sup>27</sup> The earth, which is twice that size, encompasses it on all sides. The ocean, which is twice that size, encompasses the earth on all sides. There is a space between as thin as a razor's

<sup>25</sup> *pārikṣitāḥ* (pl.) appears to refer to the Kuru royal family of the *Rgveda*; cf. Witzel (1989: 236, 1997); also Olivelle (1998: 482).

<sup>26</sup> On the ritual logic of the *aśvamedha*, see Lindquist (2003).

<sup>27</sup> Thirty-two days is the longest possible month in the Indian calendar.

edge or a bug's wing. Indra became a bird and delivered them [the Pārikṣitas] to the wind. The wind put them in itself and went to where the offerers of the horse sacrifice were. In a similar way, he [the Gandharva] praised only wind. Therefore the 'individual' is simply the wind and the 'collective' is [simply] the wind. Whosoever knows this in this way avoids repeated death."

This larger discussion about the concrete and abstract nature of death comprises approximately the first third of BĀU 3. The common goal of averting repeated death (*punararmṛtyu*) is mentioned on two occasions (3.2.10, 3.3.2) in passages that are explicitly concerned with the nature of death. The need for avoiding death, and only secondarily its transcendence, is emphasized in the direct statements that people die and bodies bloat, but names are not forgotten and do not die with a person. This part of the text, then, is more concerned with highlighting the basis for the need of transcendence, rather than elaborating what transcendence is.

### WHAT DOES NOT DIE?

The next section of BĀU 3, which emphasizes immortality and transcendence in a more obvious fashion, has been dealt with more thoroughly in the secondary material. However, I want to emphasize the role of the characters and narrative, not as a handmaiden to philosophy, but as part and parcel of it. It is here that the discussion of death that I have outlined above appears to take a backseat to the philosophical content of these dialogues. Interestingly, and so far unnoticed in scholarship, is that while death is only implied in the philosophical content of these dialogues, *it is front and center in narrative*—in the verbal sparring between the characters in the debate itself. While the philosophical content does not deal with death directly, the characters do in their threats to each other. This is *not* accidental, but it is a rhetorical strategy that grounds the apparently more abstract topic of discussion in the concrete world of the characters themselves. I will return to this shortly.

The following passages continue with the theme of death, but focus on what is not ultimately affected by it—the "self within all" (*ātmā sarvāntara*). BĀU 3.4 and 3.5 consist of one interlocutor in each (Uṣasta Cākrāyaṇa and Kahola Kauṣītakeya, respectively) asking Yājñavalkya about this "self within all." Yājñavalkya answers Uṣasta by explaining the nature of the breaths in relation to the self (3.4.1) and then in relation to the sense organs and sense objects (3.4.2). Kahola asks the same question (3.5) as Uṣasta, but he is answered by

Yājñavalkya in regard to the person “who is the one who goes beyond hunger and thirst, suffering and delusion, old age and death” (*yo ’śanāyāpipāse śokaṃ mohaṃ jarāṃ mrtyum atyeti*).<sup>28</sup>

In 3.6, Gārgī asks Yājñavalkya about the foundation of various worlds based on a metaphor of weaving.<sup>29</sup> The rest of the passage consists of a series of interlocking worlds that are woven upon each other and culminate in the world of *brahman*. Gārgī then continues her reductive questioning, but is sharply stopped by Yājñavalkya:

*kasmin nu khalu brahmalokā otās ca protās ceti | sa hovāca gārgi  
mātiprākṣiḥ | mā te mūrdhā vyapaptat | anatipraśnyāṃ vai devatām  
atipṛcchasi | gārgi mātiprākṣiḥ iti |*

“But on what are the worlds of *brahman* woven to and fro?”

Yājñavalkya said, “Gārgī, don’t ask about what is beyond this lest your head shatter apart! You are asking beyond the deity that should not be asked beyond. Gārgī, don’t ask beyond [this]!”

Many scholars have noted and discussed this first head-shattering threat in the text.<sup>30</sup> Most have pointed to the fact that a head-shattering threat may be a way to end a debate, either with a real threat of death (Witzel) or a threat of another sort (Insler). In any case, as Witzel has noted in earlier uses of the threat, the standard response is for the person threatened to admit his or her ignorance. In the case of a public *brahmodya*, however, an interlocutor becoming the student of another would be out of place, so Gārgī, like the previous interlocutors, falls silent (*upararāma*) to admit her defeat.

What hasn’t been noted before, though, is that Yājñavalkya’s head-shattering threat to Gārgī brings the topic under discussion concretely back to the theme of death from the earlier portion of the text. An abstract discussion about ascent and immortality (Brereton 1997: 8) is brought back down to earth, not by the philosophical content of the discourse directly, but rather within the verbal sparring of the characters themselves. In BĀU 3.6, Gārgī is threatened by Yājñavalkya with a shattered head which entails the possibility of a very real death. The reality of this threat, quite different from the earlier textual examples mentioned by Witzel (1987), is proven later in the case of Śākalya.

<sup>28</sup>3.4 and 3.5 end with the same refrain: “all besides this is grief” (*ato ’nyad ārtam*). This list here, along with the desire for sons, wealth, and various worlds, appears to be aspects of “grief” (*ārtam*) which culminates Yājñavalkya’s response. The point of this teaching is that the “self within all” is beyond all this.

<sup>29</sup>See Rau (1970).

<sup>30</sup>Black (2007), Insler (1989–90), Lindquist (2008, forthcoming [b]), and Witzel (1987).



This threat of a shattered head is then repeated again in 3.7 when Uddālaka asks Yājñavalkya about the “inner controller” (*antaryāmin*) and “thread” (*sūtra*). Uddālaka threatens Yājñavalkya that his head will shatter if he cannot answer, but Yājñavalkya does so. Yājñavalkya answers by describing this “inner controller” as a foundational self (*ātma*) which lies behind the senses, etc. While Yājñavalkya’s answer is not about death directly, his own life is at stake and the foundation he describes is the opposite of death, the “immortal” (*amṛta*; lit. non-death).

In 3.8, Gārgī questions Yājñavalkya a second time and she describes herself as a “warrior-son” (*ugraputra*) of the famed Videha or Kāśī wielding “two enemy-piercing arrows” (*dvau bāṇavantau sapatnātivvyādhinau*). This martial imagery continues the theme of death, but in the frame of the discussion, suggesting again that while death may not be the central topic discussed, it literally looms in the background. Gārgī’s questions invert Yājñavalkya’s earlier threat of a shattered head and intensify the death threat through the imagery of a warrior, suggesting that if he cannot answer he will be struck down by arrows. That this probably entailed a very real death is explicitly stated in the other recension of this story (BĀUM): *tau cen me na vivakṣyati mūrdhāsya vipatiṣyatīti* (“If he does not answer me these two, his head will shatter apart”).

This head shattering that I have pointed out, however, follows a formal pattern that has not been noted in the secondary literature. The first threat of a shattered head (3.6) is a threat to not ask beyond the nature of *brahman* probably because, by definition, there is nothing that can be the foundation of what is considered the foundation of everything. Uddālaka’s threat, the second head-shattering threat, is a consequence if Yājñavalkya does not know the answer to his question. Uddālaka forces Yājñavalkya to tell what he knows about the “string” and “inner controller.” The final threat, the “threat of not knowing,” is also what Gārgī throws back at Yājñavalkya in 3.8. By the addition of the warrior metaphor, Gārgī is intensifying the previous threats with arrows that also apparently kill.

The formal literary use of the shattered-head threat that produces a building tension and increases the threat of a very real death in this narrative can be summarized as follows:

3.6 = death threat; 3.7 = counter death threat; 3.8 = intensified death threat

In each case, the death from a shattered head is avoided. In 3.6, Gārgī heeds the warning of a shattered head because she had asked beyond

something that cannot be asked beyond and so she stops questioning. In 3.7 and 3.8, though, the situation is different. In these cases, a shattered head is a consequence of not knowing the answer to a question. While this threat has commonly been interpreted as a special rule for public debate to force an answer or stop the questioning, I think there is something much more specific at stake. Certainly, the stakes of a public debate are much higher than private discussions and the Upaniṣads and Brāhmaṇas are filled with such examples. In this case, though, the nature of the answers suggests that Yājñavalkya is not just satisfying a rule by answering, but rather that he is dispelling the threat altogether: Yājñavalkya is showing in this context that he knows the true nature of immortality and, as such, a death threat is really just an empty threat.

In both cases, Yājñavalkya answers in reference to principles that are beyond death (*amṛta*) or beyond destruction (*akṣara*). In this sense, he is not only answering to avoid the threat of a shattered head, but he is proving by means of his knowledge that such a death is not even possible for a person who truly knows. As a person who knows the nature of immortality, Yājñavalkya is, by definition, a person who averts repeated death (i.e., he is immortal). Death is ultimately of no consequence to Yājñavalkya because he knows that the indestructible or immortal principle will continue in the ascent to other worlds. These principles are beyond death and destruction, and so is the true knower of them.

While the threat of a shattered head that is employed between characters has sometimes been dismissed as indicative of haughtiness on the part of a literary character's personality,<sup>31</sup> such characterizations miss a central point. What has been ignored simply as a "narrative element," I contend, is central to understanding the interrelationship of the doctrine and the narrative. As we have seen, the theme of death is central to the first part of this text (3.1–3.5). In the middle section (3.6–3.8), the focus has been on the ascent from this world, but in the context of death threats between characters. Such threats are avoided by Gārgī accepting that she has to stop questioning and by Yājñavalkya knowing the right answers.

To make the connection between narrative and doctrine more clear: the BĀU is a text about averting repeated death (3.1–3.4) where certain characters (Gārgī, but especially Yājñavalkya) avert the very real death of a shattered head (3.5–3.8). In the case of

<sup>31</sup>See, for example, Fišer (1984).

Yājñavalkya, he *averts such a death repeatedly* (3.7 and 3.8). This is not an attempt at clever phrasing on my part. If we bifurcate the doctrine from the narrative as has been the tendency (even if it usually means ignoring the latter), the doctrine is about the nature of death, how one avoids it, and the nature of immortality. On a narrative level, the threats between characters in this text are about a real threat of death by a shattered head and the proper means to avoid it (by shutting up or properly answering). This bifurcation, however, is artificial—this text is first and foremost a story, and what the characters say and how they interact in the narrative are part and parcel of the same thing. The characters and the ideas that they are espousing reinforce each other and both simultaneously explain the nature of death and how to transcend it.<sup>32</sup>

### WHAT DOES DIE? OR, IMMORTALITY DENIED

If the story so far, as I have described it, is about the nature of death and how to avoid it (both as the topic of discussion and among the characters themselves), an obvious question should arise: what if death is not avoided? While Śākalya's death should not appear anomalous in the context of the argument of the text as I have analyzed it so far, it has been taken as such by scholarship to date. Like Insler and Witzel, scholars have largely assumed that Śākalya's death was a glorification or part of a legend-forming process to position Yājñavalkya and the White Yajurveda above other traditions. No doubt this is true, but it should be clear by now that *this is not all it was*. Śākalya's death is the culmination of an argument about the nature of death and how to avoid it. Certain characters avoid death, but one—very importantly—does not.

BĀU 3.9 is the final passage of the chapter. It is clear that the text so far has led the listener to understand that a climax to the argument is pending. This not only occurs in the progression of the argument that I have detailed above, but it is also found in several narrative devices throughout the text. While I have pointed out that the threat of a shattered head is utilized in a progressive fashion (3.6–3.8), suggesting

<sup>32</sup>Black and Geen discuss the role of “demonstrability” in the relation between character and the doctrine associated with him or her (see their introductory essay in this volume). While I broadly agree with their description, I prefer the stronger term “embodiment” since “to demonstrate” suggests an ultimate separateness of character and doctrine, whereas I find that doctrine can adhere to a character as much as personality traits, etc. across time. For a slightly different view of “embodiment,” see McClintock's contribution in this volume.

an intensification of the debate and an ultimate climax, there are other narrative clues as well.

One of the more notable aspects of this text is the use of sharp rhetoric and sarcasm.<sup>33</sup> A number of scholars have described Yājñavalkya as “witty” and “innovative” (Witzel 2003) or “humorous, sarcastic, and often irreverent” (Olivelle 1998: 486). There is also a similar tendency by other characters that is usually overlooked (Cf. BĀU 3.4.2, 3.6, 3.7.1, 3.8.2, 3.8.5). For now, suffice it to say that each of these verbal jabs marks off parts of the narrative and leads to the final series of death threats by head shattering. This pattern of verbal sparring is also followed in the debate between Yājñavalkya and Śākalya.

This sharp rhetoric, coupled with the threats of a shattered head, sets the stage for the more intense debate between Yājñavalkya and Śākalya (3.9). The interaction between these two becomes a proper debate, where both individuals challenge each other. This debate is elaborate, but it almost appears as if the debate is starting wholly anew. The debate begins very broadly and then progressively builds until it culminates in Yājñavalkya’s head-shattering threat to Śākalya.

For my purposes, it is not necessary to go through this debate at length; a brief synopsis should suffice. 3.9 begins with Śākalya asking Yājñavalkya about the true number of gods. Yājñavalkya begins by answering that there are “three and three hundred, and three and three thousand” (*trayaś ca trī ca śatā trayaś ca trī ca sahasrā*) gods, which is then progressively whittled down to thirty-three, six, three, two, one and a half, and then one. Śākalya then asks him to explain the different numbering of gods. After Yājñavalkya concludes (3.9.9) with the one god being “breath” (*prāṇa*), the debate shifts to asking about “that person who is the ultimate goal of every self.” This “person” (*puruṣa*) is described in relation to his “abode” (*āyatana*), “world” (*loka*), and “light” (*jyotiḥ*) in several contexts. At 3.9.18, Śākalya asks Yājñavalkya about the “formulation of truth” (*brahman*) which allowed him to out-talk (*ati-√vad*) the other Brahmins. Yājñavalkya then explains the various foundations: of the sun, sight, visible appearance, etc., of the deities associated with the directions, and then finally of the various breaths. Here (3.9.26) Yājñavalkya culminates the discussion with a statement about the *ātman* by defining it in the negative.

<sup>33</sup>Sarcasm can serve as a basis for both “stability” and “flexibility” in characterization across texts as discussed in Black and Geen’s introductory essay. It is relatively “stable” in that it is most often (but not universally) associated with Yājñavalkya, but “flexible” in that the object of sarcasm is open to interpretation in other texts. I deal with sarcasm in these texts in “A Caustic Priest or Something More?” (forthcoming [a]).

*kasmin nu tvaṃ cātmā ca pratiṣṭhitau stha iti | prāṇa iti | kasmin nu prāṇaḥ pratiṣṭhita iti | apāna iti | kasmin nu apānaḥ pratiṣṭhita iti | vyāna iti | kasmin nu vyānaḥ pratiṣṭhita iti | udāna iti | kasmin nūdānaḥ pratiṣṭhita iti | samāna iti | sa eṣa neti nety ātmā | agrhyo na hi grhyate | aśīryo na hi śīryate | asaṅgo na hi sajjyate | asito na vyathate | na riṣyati | etāny aṣṭāv āyatanāny aṣṭau lokā aṣṭau devā aṣṭau puruṣāḥ | sa yas tān puruṣān niruhyā pratyuhyāty akrāmat taṃ tvau-paniṣadam puruṣaṃ prcchāmi | taṃ cen me na vivakṣyasi mūrdhā te vipatiṣyatīti | taṃ ha na mene śākalyaḥ | tasya ha mūrdhā vipapāta | api hāsyā parimoṣiṇo 'sthīny apajahrur anyan manyamānāḥ ||26||*

[Śākalya asked,] “On what are you and your self (*ātman*) founded?”

[Yājñavalkya replied,] “On the out-breath.”

“On what is the out-breath founded?”

“On the in-breath.”

“On what is the in-breath founded?”

“On the inter-breath.”

“On what is the inter-breath founded?”

“On the up-breath.”

“On what is the up-breath founded?”

“On the link-breath,” [Yājñavalkya replied.] “The self is ‘not this, not that.’ He is ungraspable because he is not grasped. He is undecaying because he does not decay. He is not clinging because he is not clung to. He is unbound [because?] he does not tremble. He is not hurt. Those are the eight abodes, the eight worlds, the eight deities, the eight persons. I ask you about that person who is the hidden connection (*aupaniṣad*), who carries away, returns, and goes beyond those persons? If you will not tell me, your head will shatter apart!”

Alas, Śākalya did not know him. His head did, indeed, shatter apart. Robbers also stole his bones, thinking they were something else.

I have argued in another context that this final challenge to Śākalya is a culmination about “foundations;” Yājñavalkya is apparently asking about the ultimate foundation of everything. In this context, and in an immediately following poem about death and rebirth, the question appears to be the same.<sup>34</sup> Yājñavalkya’s final challenge to Śākalya is about the nature of the “person who is the hidden connection (*aupaniṣad*), who carries away, returns, and goes beyond those persons.” This “person” and its function is remarkably similar to the “root” of the tree/man metaphor in the riddle-poem that follows. Most clearly,

<sup>34</sup>I leave this poem out of the discussion here as it comes after Śākalya’s death and I have dealt with it elsewhere (Lindquist 2004).

“carries away, returns, and goes beyond” appears to refer to death, (re-) birth, and transcendence; this appears to be the same here. Thus, each question is dealing with reality in a different, but inter-related fashion. The sets of “eight” that Yājñavalkya is apparently referring to are the eight abodes, worlds, deities, and persons which were directly listed earlier in BĀU 3.9.14.

Without discussing this listing at length, suffice it to say that it is intended to encompass the entire Vedic cosmos, including the tangible or visible, the abstract, the concrete, and the celestial or divine. Yājñavalkya’s question to Śākalya at 3.9.27 then is asking about the connecting link to all that is, the ultimate foundation of everything: what destroys (“carries away”), rebuilds anew (“returns”), and transcends (“goes beyond”). In this way, Yājñavalkya appears to be referring to an immortal principle that underlies everything—thematically connected to his answers to all of the interlocutors in this debate.

## CONCLUSION

The death of Śākalya has been examined in this paper as an example of the underappreciated theme of death in BĀU 3 and the relationship of doctrine and narrative in an Upaniṣadic story. In particular, the goal has been to show that the abstraction of philosophical doctrine out of the context in which it occurs, while extremely common, is also misguided. Certainly by the time of the formation of formal schools of philosophy (*darśanas*), abstracting doctrine from narrative is common and commentators rarely comment upon the narrative elements of this or other Upaniṣadic texts. However, when scholars follow this mode of interpretation, they are assuming a normative interpretive strategy—which separates doctrinal issues from context—over one thousand years removed from the text itself.

To return to the question that began this paper: Why does Śākalya have to die at all? Why doesn’t the story just end with his defeat? Śākalya’s death serves neither simply to glorify the figure of Yājñavalkya nor is it only due to the reemergence of a literal origin. The composer(s) or editor(s) of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* is first and foremost ingeniously literalizing the trope of a shattered head to make a point. Śākalya dies because his death is the logical climax in an argument about death and the nature of immortality. Śākalya shows his ignorance in not being able to respond to Yājñavalkya’s challenge about the fundamental nature of immortality. As such, Śākalya proves—by not knowing the true nature of immortality—that he himself is mortal. To

put this plainly: narratively speaking, what better way is there to prove that a person is mortal than by killing him off?

Read in this way, the chief rival of Yājñavalkya also serves to cast the protagonist in a different light. While Yājñavalkya's character in the BĀU and his appearances in other later narratives focus on his sarcastic personality, his pride, his status as the founder of the White Yajurvedic tradition and as a sage of the ancient past,<sup>35</sup> his role in this particular narrative is one of the building blocks for those later narratives. In the context of BĀU 3, I hope I have shown that a close intratextual reading sheds light on one way in which this character was suitable for a rise to prominence in the White Yajurvedic tradition. Yājñavalkya in BĀU 3 is portrayed as not only winning a debate about the nature of the sacrifice, the self, and the cosmos, but is also portrayed as possessing an ultimate form of knowledge, knowledge that is undergirded by an understanding of what fundamentally cannot die.

This is to say that, while the "literary life" of a character involves an intertextual understanding of that figure, it is in the details of particular episodes that character and characterization are developed and serve as a type of argument. In this debate about the nature of death and immortality, the narrative frame, the philosophical doctrine, and most importantly, the two main characters are all part of a narrative and collectively form an argument. In particular, I have argued that the two main characters of Śākalya and Yājñavalkya embody the doctrine they (and others) discuss. One character understands the nature of immortality, avoids (repeated) death, and becomes the victor in a debate about the same. The other is the embodiment of a fundamental ignorance about immortality, serves as the protagonist's opposite, and therefore suffers a literal death.

There is no doubt that the various and competing *ideas* found in the Upaniṣads have captivated the minds of many scholars, both within the Hindu tradition and within the academic study of religion and philosophy. What has been less appreciated, however, is the *form* in which those ideas were and are presented, particularly in the case of narratives. Characters, personalities, conflicts, sarcasm, and so on are equally part of the Upaniṣads and the complex philosophical ideas presented within them. I have tried to show that such a division between "content" and "form" is artificial and that, in the case of the threat of a shattered head, the two mutually construct an argument about the nature of

<sup>35</sup>Lindquist (forthcoming [b]) deals at length with Yājñavalkya across literary genres. For the complexities of authorship attributed to Vedic figures, see Patton's contribution to this volume.



death and immortality. Such stories are one of the principal mediums that have kept these texts “alive” within the larger Hindu tradition, even—or perhaps especially—when they are about the nature of death.

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